Ptolemy's map of the world, printed at Ulm in 1482. [Library of Congress]

In the 15th century, European navigators began to conduct voyages to the far corners of the world. As a result, a number of emerging nation-states—including Spain, Portugal, France, the Netherlands, and Great Britain—began to build large colonial empires with trading stations and settlements in Africa, the Americas, and Asia. Each nation was competing for an advantage over its neighbor.   
  
**Trade**

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The Portuguese began the race to build a commercial empire. In the early 1400s, they began to explore the coast of West Africa with the goal of establishing a trade in gold and slaves.   
  
Fish were the natural resource that drew Europeans farther and farther into the North Atlantic Ocean. And spices drew them to India and other parts of Asia.   
  
**Converting to Christianity**   
  
Hand-in-hand with the desire for commercial success was the desire to convert the people living in faraway lands to Christianity. The work of many missionaries and chaplains was devoted to converting the indigenous peoples.   
  
**Navigational Innovations**   
  
Technological innovations had a great effect on exploration. Although the principle of the magnetic compass had been known since the 12th century, it wasn't until the 13th century that mariners began to rely heavily on it for long-distance navigation. At about the same time, shipbuilders began to replace the steersman's oar with a rudder attached to the rear of a boat, which allowed them to build heavier crafts more suited for ocean voyages.

[arco Polo travels 
by boat to port of Hormuz](http://americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Topics/Display/1182233)  
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There were also a number of advances in cartography, or mapmaking. Cartographers drew information from Venetian traveler Marco Polo's book, *The Travels of Marco Polo,* published in 1477, to draw maps that inspired European navigators to seek sea routes to India and China. A couple decades later in 1492, the German geographer Martin Behaim constructed one of the first terrestrial globes. Although his globe helped people to understand that the earth was indeed round, it misled them, too, because it showed only one large ocean between Europe and Asia and no Americas!   
  
**Pivotal Point**   
  
Italian navigator Christopher Columbus' voyage to the Americas in 1492 is considered a pivotal point in European expansion. Although at first he thought he had landed in Asia, Columbus later realized that he had landed in a "New World," a place that Europeans of the day did not even know existed. Five years later, a Portuguese navigator named Vasco da Gama sailed around the southern tip of Africa and became the first European to reach India by a sea route. His discovery meant that the Europeans finally had a way to avoid the costly taxes charged by every country between Asia and Europe for letting shipments from the East pass through.